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SUBJECT: KEEPING THE VATICAN ENGAGED ON BIOTECH

REF: 06 VATICAN 221

¶1. Summary. Dr. Greg Traxler met Vatican officials on February 15 to follow up on his visit in October 2006 as part of Post's biotechnology speaker program (reftel). Traxler met with Monsignor James Reinert of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and with Archbishop Elio Sgreccia, the President of the Pontifical Academy for Life. Reinert engaged Traxler with follow up questions from their previous meeting and was very interested to hear how biotechnology is regarded in third world countries. Bishop Sgreccia focused primarily on medical bioethics. End Summary.

¶2. In a follow up meeting to Post's October 2006 biotechnology speaker program (reftel), Dr. Greg Traxler of Auburn University -- in Rome for the FAO conference on biotechnology next steps -- and Monsignor James Reinert of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace discussed the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) stance on biotechnology, the growth of corn and other plants for fuel instead of food, and the delays in applying biotechnology in some countries.

¶3. Traxler explained that Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) are currently taboo at the FAO because they are associated with multinational companies rather than with scientific research. Despite the FAO's groundbreaking 2004 "State of Food and Agriculture" report that was largely positive about the potential of GMO food to help people in under developed countries, the daily reality at the FAO is that GMOs are not discussed in any scientific context. Traxler argued that the FAO should serve as a fair broker, linking science and people in need. Public sector research seems to be held up by bureaucracy and by the unwillingness of government ministers to go head to head against each other.

¶4. Corn grown for fuel instead of food is another significant concern for the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, especially since it is already affecting populations in the United States and Mexico. The corn is grown to produce ethanol, a fuel that can be used in cars, but at the cost of growing corn for food; according to Reinert, tortilla prices in Mexico have increased sharply and are causing some civil unrest. The Vatican is also concerned about farmers in Africa rushing to plant Jatropha (a popular source of oilseed that can be used for fuel), because of the danger of substituting a fuel crop for a food crop while people are starving, but would support planting this crop if it would help stop desertification.

¶5. Traxler cited Thailand as a specific example of a country that would benefit from GMOs, but is strongly opposed to them due to the influence of such NGOs as Greenpeace. Papaya and cotton have suffered a severe reduction in productive hectares due to a worm problem, and would benefit almost immediately from biotech plantings. These NGOs will continue to push the issue until funding runs out or something else that grabs headlines

comes down the path.

¶6. Traxler met separately with Archbishop Sgreccia, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life. Sgreccia was unable to participate in the October meeting, but has been a key U.S. ally on biotechnology. The Academy for Life was gearing up for a conference on "The Christian Conscience in Support of the Right to Life" (septel) and while the Academy is still interested in biotechnology, Sgreccia clearly preferred to focus on bioethics and stem-cell research.

¶7. Comment. The Vatican is clearly still interested in agricultural biotechnology and its potential to aid under-developed countries. Post's interlocutors are focused on Africa and Asia and are concerned that the countries that could benefit the most from biotechnology continue to resist it. We hear questions at every meeting concerning the lack of acceptance of biotechnology in Africa and Asia, and interlocutors are always seeking more information on why this is and how it can be overcome. End Comment.

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